A Simple Life

Desi Anwar

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Text and Photos by Desi Anwar

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FOREWORD

Why a simple life? Because if there's one thing we're good at in this life, is making things complicated! It is as if the only way we know we're alive, is to worry about it. We worry about the past, about the future, about what other people think, about what other people don't think, about the things that happen and those that are not happening. We clutter our mind and our surrounding with too many thoughts and too many objects. We are constantly on the move, like a spinning top that is afraid to stop, because stopping means falling down. And we are afraid of falling, because it means letting go.

And yet, often we can see life better and all its beauty, when we are still. Letting go does not necessarily mean that we lose control or missing out on living. If anything, it makes us more in control of what to do and where to go in life, rather than allowing life's current and turbulence take us on its roller coaster ride.

I write this book because when you simplify life, it brings greater clarity to living and a greater appreciation of its beauty. Life is a journey that is best enjoyed when you can take in the breathtaking scenery, when you can sit back and

sip a cup of tea, even as you move in the direction of your destination.

Moreover, simplicity allows us to clearly differentiate the things that are important to us in the long run, and those that have no lasting value. Simplicity gives us the facility to be mindful and to penetrate the tangle of distractions that we are constantly faced with. So that we can make the best choices in how to go about living our lives.

Things such as keeping good health, developing good habits, surrounding oneself with loving friends, enjoying nature, learning new things, slowing down, may not count much in today's world of relentless pursuit of success, material wealth and social status. And yet, at the end of the day, it is these things, the laughter with those we love, the quiet moment spent on our own, the joy of being out in the fresh air with the grass beneath our feet, that we enjoy and really matter to us.

Things that may appear simple, and yet can make us feel happy and truly alive.

Desi Anwar

White beach at Gili Trawangan, Lombok

Enjoy a Lie-in

What with all our busy schedules these days—office to go to, errands to make, people to meet, breakfast, lunch or dinner appointments to attend—it seems the only thing we do is run around all day with time snapping at our heels. During one of our busiest days, sometimes even taking a little toilet break seems a luxury.

Even during the weekend, the only time we get to let our hair down, we are no less harried, though this time we rush to catch up on all those activities we want to do with friends and family. There are weddings, birthdays and parties to attend, the weekly shopping at the mall, a film at the cinema which we mustn't miss, all of which require getting stuck in the traffic and checking the time.

Once in a while, I make a point to leave my calendar free, at least for half a day, whether over the weekend or when I decide to take the day off work. Purely so I could enjoy a little lie-in.

Having a little lie-in in bed when the world around is already up and about on their feet, is one of life's most enjoyable luxuries. It brings us back to the days when we were still at school and when the mornings of the weekends were for sleeping in. A welcome pause from our studies.

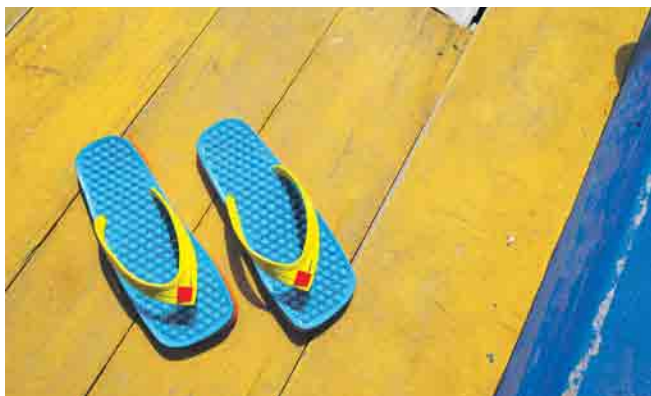
With the blinds still drawn and the alarm clock off, the head tucked under the covers, the bed seems like the most comforting place in the world, protecting us from the harsh reality of life and all the rushing about that goes with it.

Even when sleep no longer weighs heavily on our eyelids, we linger in the realm of our slumber, at times not being able to tell the difference between sleep and wakefulness.

Sometimes it's good to allow ourselves to sleep heavily and dreamlessly, and for long hours, as if to catch up with all the lack of sleep we lost over the weeks. And wake up only when the sun is well above our heads and there's hunger pangs in our stomach.

During this lie-in, we need not feel guilty, but see it as a necessary reward we give ourselves for all the late nights and busy days that we subject ourselves to. It is the perfect time to reconnect with our bodies, feeling our back sinking into the mattress, wriggling our toes under the sheet, our eyes idly staring at the ceiling, while our mind tries to decipher our quickly-forgotten dreams.

It is good to lie in bed until even our body cries "enough" and we finally get up to greet the world with renewed vigour, and to resume once more our busy schedule.

Gondolier waiting for passengers on his gondola, Venice, Italy

Beach sandals on a boat

Gardening

Once I bought myself one of those grow kits one can buy from a do-it-yourself store for urban dwellers who live in apartments and have minimal space for planting things. The kit was for growing sunflowers and it came with everything necessary to grow a bunch of healthy-looking sunflowers. At least, that was what it said on the box.

There was a square, white ceramic pot, a bag full of the growing medium, a sort of special soil full of nutrients I imagined, and a small sachet of sunflower seeds.

I read the instructions carefully. This was my first attempt at growing anything. My house actually has a small but shady garden full of trees, plants and shrubs that seem to grow without much help. After all, I live in the tropics and everything seems to grow easily here, even without planting anything. Especially weeds. Fortunately I have a gardener who comes in once in a while to tend to the plants and make sure the trees and shrubs don't overgrow and overrun the house.

But the idea of planting my own flower appealed to me. For a change I wanted to be the initiator of that creative process, to be an active participant of Mother Nature's work of art.

The instruction said to moisten the medium before putting it into the pot. And then you spread the sunflower seeds (there were thirteen of them) on top before covering it with a centimeter layer of the medium.

I had to keep the medium moist but not wet and it was important to water the seeds twice a day. Once in the morning and once in the afternoon. Moreover, the pot must be kept in a stable room temperature and not under direct sunlight. I put the pot next to the window in my bedroom with a plastic sprayer conveniently placed nearby.

And then I was ready to watch it grow.

Nothing seemed to happen after a few days, even as I religiously watered the pot as soon as I got out of bed. I was starting to think may be I needed to live in an apartment in Paris for the sunflowers to spring to life. Just like the picture on the box.

Then one morning I saw a tiny green stalk peeking out of the soil. Beneath the shell of the sunflower seed, something was definitely growing.

I was overjoyed. Especially when, in the days that followed, more and more of these little green shoots started to make an appearance. What I was witnessing was nothing less than nature in action, creating a living thing out of the seemingly dead seed that I could have eaten for snacks.

With regular watering and encouraging words—I hear that if you talk to plants you can actually make them grow faster—the shoots grew taller and very soon shed their dried out shells to reveal bright green leaves. Tiny and fragile in the little white ceramic pot.

And then there were too many shoots in the pot. Soon some showed signs of dying while others were growing taller than the rest. Clearly the pot was getting too small for thirteen baby sunflowers fighting for space and nutrients.

I got some plastic ice cream tubs and filled them with soil from the back of the garden and transferred the delicate shoots as carefully as I could. I watered them carefully and asked the gardener to fertilize the soil.

Within a few days I realized my efforts were futile. The baby sunflowers were dying as the thin leaves turned yellow first, then brown and then shriveled altogether while the stalks found it hard to stay upright.

I did not wish to witness their slow and painful death and gave the rows of sorry-looking plastic pots to the gardener to deal with. But I knew that it was too late. Growing things was not as easy as I thought.

My gardener however, managed to save a couple of the sturdier shoots. After a few days, the yellowing leaves gave way to greener and healthier ones while the stalks grew thicker and stronger.

A restaurant in Krakow, Poland

Plants and rooster outside a cafe, Krakow, Poland

The Old Town, Krakow, Poland

I see them now, bigger and healthier in proper pots amongst other potted plants. It turned out what they needed was real sunshine and fresh air and not be cooped up indoors.

I never realized how much pleasure growing things actually gave me, and I look forward to having a row of sunflowers brighten up the garden and greeting passerby with their beautiful and sunny smiles.

But life is not without a struggle. After the first bright yellow flower made its appearance, a rat chewed part of its growing stalk and very soon the young sunflower was on the brink of death. Nature is cruel. But the will to live is strong.

And I see it now, holding on to life, sucking as much nutrients from the soil as it can, hoping to make it to another day.

Meditation

At one point in my life I was very interested in meditation. It was a New Age phase that I went through, along with learning how to channel energy through Reiki, giving up red meat, collecting crystals and doing regular internal cleansing. Actually, until now I'm still careful about what I eat and keeping my bowels healthy, though when it comes to meditation, I've become a lot more lax.

I learned meditation the difficult way, by joining a Vipassana ten-day meditation retreat at a vihara in central Java with a good friend. I did not know what to expect or what I was hoping to gain, but I was willing to take a ten-day break from my life and came to the retreat with an open mind and a huge amount of curiosity.

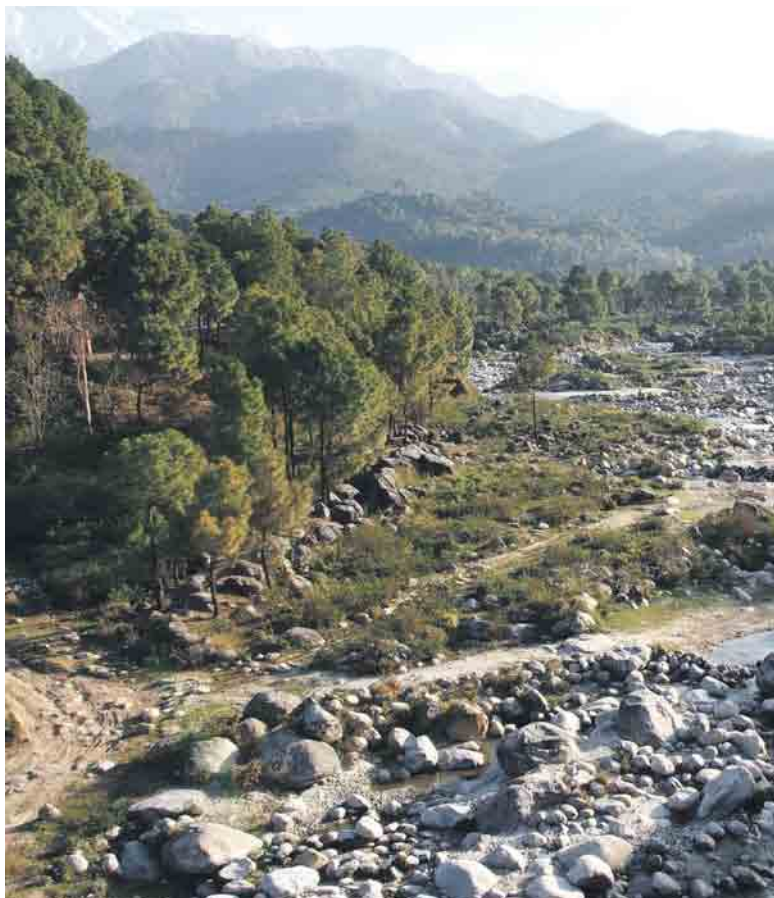
This was just as well, as the experience was something I had never encountered before. To begin with, the participants were all housed in one big hall. There were no beds or mattresses, but belly-high partitions that separated one person from the other. My friend and I chose a spot against the wall, next to each other, where we rolled out our mats and use our bags as pillows.

There were around fifty participants of both sexes and various ages and occupations, though I notice most were of Chinese descents. This was hardly surprising as the retreat was at a Buddhist monastery. As we registered we had to switch off our mobile phones and pledged to cut ourselves off from the rest of the world.

For the next ten days, participants were not allowed any form of communication with each other, including using sign language and even through eye contact. I was not sure if I could avoid communicating with my friend. Especially since she was practically next to me twenty four hours a day. I couldn't imagine not looking at each other or saying anything as we fold our sarongs, sit together at breakfast or queue with our toothbrushes for the bathroom.

As it turned out, however, not communicating was hardly the hardest part of the retreat.

The programme itself was actually quite simple to follow. Meditators are woken up by a bell at four in the morning for a two-hour dawn meditation in the meditating hall. Then we are allowed an hour for shower and breakfast, all done in complete silence of course, and given a moment to ourselves to enjoy the morning sunlight before doing another stretch of meditation until midday. We then have a short lunch break of a small meal followed by a few more hours of meditation that takes us to the evening.

All together, a total of ten hours of meditation a day with two very small meals and short toilet breaks if needed in between the meditations. Bedtime is

River valley, Uttar Pradesh, India

at ten o'clock after an enlightening lecture on the benefits of what we're going through. And to dispel any notion of jumping the fence and run away from the monastery.

The meditation technique is also very simple, which is to concentrate on the space between the top of the lips and the nostrils, feeling the breaths coming in and out and the sensation it gives.

In practice, however, it was torture. For the first couple of days I fought against hunger, boredom, sleepiness and an infinite number of aches and pains in every part of my body as I shifted and fidgeted in my lotus pose, trying to find the most comfortable and painless position.

I tried not to think of anything. Which was an invitation to thinking about everything. My thoughts jumped from one to another like unruly monkeys that I couldn't control. Sometimes, the sound of the meditation guide's voice would put me back on track. Other times, it would lull me to sleep. Most of the time, however, I had to concentrate on keeping still and resist the impulse to get up, leave the place and have a nice cup of tea with my friends. I didn't realise how difficult it was not being able to runaway from yourself and your thoughts.

After the third day, things began to change. I was no longer distracted by hunger. Even our small lunch felt a bit too filling. After all, we were not using up much energy. The aches and pains lessened considerably. I focused on the triangular space below my nostrils and found that the space between my thoughts grew wider and wider, until I found myself not thinking.

Instead, during these gaps in my thoughts, I experienced true silence. As my mind chatter dissolved, so did my sense of myself. The "I" who is the author of all my thoughts was suddenly absent. My "I" became a part of something larger. Was it the universe?

As days went by, I found myself increasingly no longer the author of my thoughts. Rather my brain became the medium for images, ideas, conversations that emerge from a deeper source, deep within me, but also vast outside of me. I was both the asker of questions and the answerer of the questions.

After ten days, I felt like an electrical instrument that was finally plugged to the source and finally connected. For the first time in my life, I was whole.

There was a clarity in my mind that was not there before. A clarity brought on by ten days of sweeping away layers of accumulated thoughts, emotions and mental habits. The feeling was not one of relaxation, but freedom.

If that kind of meditation sounds hard, it is. And I don't recommend it unless you're really committed. However, the benefit of meditation is huge, as it can improve your power of concentration and focus. Also there are different types of meditation that are easier to practice. Just a few minutes of paying attention to your breathing twice a day is sufficient to keep you grounded and positive.

I myself now no longer spend much time let alone hours meditating. This is partly out of laziness, but also because for me meditation is not about emptying the mind, relaxing or focusing on an object.

It is about finding that connection to the deep source within you, and you can do this at anytime of day, even while in the middle of doing things, by simply being aware of your being, of the sensations you're feeling, aware of the thoughts that enter your mind and the rise and fall of your emotions. In other words, by being in total awareness of your existence.

When you do this, you will find that beneath the ebb and flow of your day to day existence, the hustle and bustle of your daily life, there is an ocean of stillness and peace and a sense of infinite freedom. Which is what we all seek for in life.

Gong in Sherabling Monastery, Uttar Pradesh, India

Being a Child

Do you remember what it was like when you were a child? The world is a big place full of wonderful, exciting and mysterious things to discover and explore. Every day is an invitation to adventure and to have fun. You never want it to end and you struggle against going to bed because you're afraid of missing out. Instead, you skip, dance, sing, scream and laugh your day away until exhaustion overtakes you and you fall asleep wherever you find yourself to be, and a grown up picks you up and puts you to bed.

There are so many things to learn when you're a child. The word that comes most easily to your lips is "why"? You ask question about anything and everything and you're not afraid to ask even those questions that adults would rather you didn't ask. Because as a child, you fear nothing. You want to know everything, and you're not afraid of the truth.

And when there are things you don't understand, or don't know how they work, as a child you're quick to ask "how"? You don't pretend you know something that you don't, and you're not ashamed of your ignorance because you know that in order not to be ignorant, the only thing you need to do is ask. Because only by asking will you find the answer.